

Breaking the Silence on Women Leaders in the Early Church

A Review of *Excavating Women: The Archaeology of Leaders in Early Christianity*

By Carina Oliveira Prestes (Fortress, 2025)

Reviewed by Mimi Haddad

Exquisitely researched and thoroughly reasoned, *Excavating Women: The Archaeology of Leaders in Early Christianity* traces archaeological markers used to honor women leaders in pre- and early Christian centuries. From Greek and Roman temples to tombs, churches, and catacombs, archaeologist and professor Dr. Carina Prestes excavates women's leadership at odds with literary texts of their day. As her analysis unfolds, we learn how one generation spoke to another in the language of archaeology, repeating and repurposing leadership markers in clothing, objects left in tombs, mosaics, and inscriptions that, once seen, are impossible to ignore. *Excavating Women* includes numerous images to illustrate her conclusions. As ancient stones cry out, *Excavating Women* is a book whose time has come!

The author begins by describing her methodology and the scope of her work in ch. 1, which is both a compelling epistemological strategy and one she has pioneered.¹ Chapter 2 examines lesser-known markers of women leaders prior to Christianity. Once documented, these markers are carefully traced in both the burial and mosaic remains, illustrating women serving as deacons, priests, bishops, and elders in chs. 3 and 4. Piecing the evidence together, ch. 5 considers the history of women leaders from antiquity through the early church and into late antiquity—a legacy that confronts errors and biases in literary accounts of women leaders from these very centuries.

A New Methodology Yields New Evidence

Each chapter stress-tests Prestes's methodology to yield impressive results. In the first chapter, titled "Introduction: Context, Scope, Method," Prestes begins by noting the paucity of historical research on women—a bias that is all too common. Because of this, she has developed a process that assesses the archaeological artifacts depicting women's lives and leadership alongside the relevant texts in same the timeframe. She writes:

there is currently no publication that documents the chronological development of women's participation in Christian communities based on a broad analysis of evidence from different artifact classes including a wide variety of artistic media. (4–5)

In ch. 1, Prestes recognizes two leading scholars—Dorothy Irvin and Christine Schenk—both of whom are archaeological experts on women leaders in the early church. And both are, therefore, well-known to CBE.² As archaeologists, they consider perspectives and options apart from theological and historical texts and their assumptions (7). Archaeologists therefore have the freedom to ask not, should women be ordained, but "what was the role of women in Early Christianity?" (7). What does "a broad analysis of material evidence in its context suggest?" (7). Through a multi-disciplinary analysis coupled with new "methodologies and approaches" (9), a more accurate understanding of early church women surfaces. Significantly, Prestes demonstrates the capacity of archaeology to minimize the risk of bias from "a single media to illuminate as many aspects as possible" (9). This becomes the scope and method guiding the discussions that follow.

Titled "Women Before Christianity: An Unexpected Strength," ch. 2 considers prominent examples of women's overlapping leadership in cultic and civic spheres, specifically those of priestesses and patrons respectively. Prestes clarifies how culture rewarded women's status

and influence with financial, legal, and social benefits, and significantly through public recognition in the form of statues, inscriptions, and artwork. Here, Prestes guides readers in learning the language of archaeology to identify women priestesses as frontal facing and with hands "lifted in prayer suggesting piety" (18). Pre-Christian symbols of leadership also include the wreath, "laurel branch, libation bowl (or jugs) . . . vestments, jewelry, a fancy headband or crown, and a draped mantle under the right arm" (18). Christians later adopted these symbols to identify women leaders in early churches even as Greek and Roman culture had held different expectations for women's public behavior in pre-Christian centuries.

Prestes shows that, whereas Greek women were honored for their cultic and civic leadership, Roman women were expected to be modest, "quiet, subordinate to men, passive members of society . . . they were not allowed to speak in public" (20). However, in times of war and political instability, the archaeological remains indicate that women entered public life. They ran shops; they spoke for civic leaders and served as city patrons (21ff.). Rome also had its women priests—the Vestal Virgins who wielded remarkable power (23). Even beyond the imperial city, women were priestesses (called *Sacerdos*) in cities such as Pompeii. As the Emperor Cult spread, Prestes shows how the material remains of women priestesses, patrons, and benefactors served the expanding empire. Again, Prestes examines the remains of these women as they were honored with statues at the front of temples, and with "inscriptions in prominent places in the city . . . the forum and the city gates" (29). And women priestesses wore crowns—a symbol that marked their leadership in the centuries that followed (35).

Brilliantly, ch. 2 shows how women leading "house churches" merged both "public and private spheres" (45). This not only honored cultural expectations for women alongside their lived experiences, whether Greek or Roman, but also how women "evangelized within their social network" (50) to the point that they outnumbered men in these communities. By the second century, "60 percent of the members of Christian communities . . . were women" (50). Further, women with raised hands (*orant*) comprised 70 percent of Roman catacombs portraits compared to 10 percent of men, with couples comprising 20 percent (51). Women's influence is equally evident in prominent pagan cults in "major cities like Ephesus (Artemis), Corinth (Aphrodite) and Athens (Athena)" (51). Large communities not only worshipped a female deity, the goddess and priestess "dominated the religious life of the city" (51). As women thronged to religious leadership, the emperor Augustus (63 BC–AD 14) issued laws curtailing women's behavior (54). Prestes points out that, "when Paul advises women to be silent" (55), it is not because culture required their silence. On the contrary! The archaeological evidence shows women leaders were far from silent when in cultic and civic spaces. For this reason, Prestes suggests something else was behind Paul's silencing of women, given how the archaeological evidence is often at odds with literary sources.

Titled "Women and the Evidence of Early Christian Burials: An Unexpected Bishop," the third chapter demonstrates how early Christians harnessed pagan and Jewish symbols of leadership to depict women leaders serving churches. Prestes also explored personal items found in a tomb located close to an altar where church leaders were honored. This tomb contained gold earrings, a gold diadem, and a silver

medallion that belonged to an influential, wealthy woman in Sicily (64). According to Prestes, since the Greeks were influential in Sicily, and as they also accepted priestesses, the leadership of women from Greek temples spilled over to Christian churches, as the tomb contents suggest. Further, as church hierarchy strengthened, so did the limits on women church leaders. By the fourth century, the Council of Laodicea prohibited women presbyters and forbade women from approaching the altar, thus confirming the existence of both practices (76)! Prestes explains how prohibitions parallel the archaeological evidence from inscriptions that honor women “leading religious communities” along with their “Christian clerical titles” (77). One example is the woman Kale—a presbyter, and a “woman without reproach”—a phrase used for leaders holding religious office. Equally, Prestes shows that women leaders were also honored by symbols (wreaths and crowns) with inscriptions marking them as presbyters, prophets, and apostles.

Turning to the catacombs, Prestes unearths a trove of early Christian art to examine symbols marking women in ecclesial offices, “realities not always expressed in the written record” (84). Given that the catacombs are a funeral record of an important person’s life, Prestes observes that the “Christian catacombs not only contain a disproportionately greater number of images of dead women in comparison to men” (85), but also that the many “women portrayed in these frescoes seem to suggest the strong engagement, presence, and agency of women in the Christian communities” (85). Two prominent women featured in the San Gennaro catacombs in Naples are Bitalia and Cerula. Both are frontal facing “with open arms and raised in a prayer-like orans position” (87), with what is likely the Gospels opened above their heads—indicating their literacy and also their ordination as priests, deacons, or bishops. Symbols like the alpha and omega further suggest that both women were either deacons or bishops. Intriguingly, the “bishop Severian of Gabala (380–425) wrote that the gospel book should be held over the ordination candidate in order that the Holy Spirit’s tongues of fire would descend, as in the upper room at Pentecost, and ordain the new bishop” (90). As Prestes makes clear, when mosaics, tombs, frescos, and inscriptions are analyzed, the combined evidence reveals that ordained women led churches at high offices, even as their leadership was prohibited by the writings of male clerics at the time.

Titled “Women and the Christian Mosaics of Late Antiquity: An Unexpected Counterpart,” ch. 4 examines women portrayed in the mosaics in early Christian worship. Attentive to the number of women and their location within the ceremonial context, Prestes reveals a consistent pattern of women leading church worship as elders. A well-preserved example is the mosaic of empress Theodora (490/500–548) and her emperor husband Justinian I (482–565) are prominently featured in San Vitale, a church in Ravenna, Italy. Both spouses are frontal facing and close to the altar—in the apse—where clergy served communion. On one side of the apse, Theodora holds the chalice for wine, while on the other side, Justinian holds the bowl for bread. According to Prestes, the apse was a holy space most often reserved for the clergy. Therefore, the portrayal of Justinian and Theodora suggests that both men and women served the communion. Attentive to the biblical references, Prestes observes how the mosaic of this church depicts the vision of the throne of God registered in Rev 4 and 5—some of the elements include the four living creatures (Rev 4:7), the scroll with seven seals (Rev 5:1), and the Lamb (Rev 5:6). Hence, the processions led by Theodora and Justinian are depicting female and male elders. The theme of the coronation of Christ (Rev 4 and 5) also appears in another building in Ravenna, San Apollinare Nuovo. It depicts elders casting their crowns before the throne. These mosaics also imply that both men and women were “perceived as part of the twenty-four elders (*presbyteroi*) of Revelation—leaders of the community bringing their crowns before the one sitting on the throne”

(126). A church in Croatia also depicts this scene, emphasizing the significance of this passage for that community.

Prestes concludes ch. 4 by examining women’s clothing in a mosaic panel retelling Mary’s visit with Elizabeth. In this image, both women are located in the apse, and each wears a long white scarf under her cloak with the Greek cross that scholars use to identify a bishop (137–38).

Mounting further evidence, Prestes considers two churches in Rome named after women and both are also featured in the apse—the church of Santa Pudenziana and Santa Praxedis. Prestes notes that Santa Pudenziana was located “on top of a second-century house” believed to be a house church with the “earliest surviving apse with mosaics in Rome” (138). Citing other mosaics that portray women “performing all ministerial activities that men performed” (143), a tipping point of women leading as elders and bishops is reached. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book!

The last chapter, titled “An Unexpected History,” evaluates Greco-Roman archaeological remains through the sixth century. Here, Prestes rehearses significant patterns. First, the literary accounts diverge from the archaeological evidence. Second, whereas women leaders are either prohibited or under-represented in written texts, the archaeological remains tell their story as elders, deacons, and bishops. Third, “literary accounts” favor “the ideologies of the author or of the patron” (147) contra the actual work and lived experiences of women. While the bias of the written texts is rehearsed, strengthened, and passed on as historical fact across the centuries, archaeologists like Prestes have a powerful tool and a unique opportunity to challenge longstanding bias by excavating women’s leadership through the language of archaeology. Chapter 5 is a delightful review of these material remains that free women’s leadership from bias by those who have controlled the past to control the future.³ Supremely, *Excavating Women* tells the story of women’s authentic leadership from pre-Christian to early and Christian times, bringing light and life on every page.

The book’s strengths are manifold, including the author’s innovative methodologies tracing markers of women’s leadership in pre-Christian centuries through the early church period. Prestes’s thesis is both original and supported by substantial evidence and is accessible to a wide range of readers. Places for improvement might include clarifying whether “casting crowns before the throne” is cited in Rev 5 (ch. 4). Another weakness easily addressed includes providing in the footnotes helpful information (e.g., author, publisher, year) when citing resources by Dorothy Irvin and Christine Schenk. Mostly focused on Italy, Prestes’s thesis might be strengthened by examining the art remains in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere. Despite these minor weaknesses, all in all, *Excavating Women* is a pioneering achievement that demonstrates the power of archaeology to accurately recover the history of early Christian women. Because of this, CBE will co-host a twelve-day tour of Italy (Fall 2026) exploring the sites mentioned in this book, with Dr. Carina Prestes as our guide. We hope you will join us!

Notes

1. Compare the publications of Ally Kateusz, including “Women Leaders at the Table in Early Churches,” *Priscilla Papers* 34/2 (Spring 2020) 14–22.
2. See Jamie Manson on Dorothy Irvin, <https://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/women-priests-demonstrate-profound-faithfulness-god>. Christine Schenk’s book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 2017), won the Catholic Press Association’s first-place award in the history category. See also <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/bitalia-ancient-woman-priest/> and <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/religion-women-and-children-christian-womans/>.
3. “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” is a quotation from George Orwell’s 1949 novel, *1984*.